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Fig. 2 & 3 Sleeveless flapper style black chiffon cocktail dress with dropped waist and Art Deco beading, silver bugle beads, ca. 1920s. TMU FRC2003.10.002.

FASHION OF A REBEL: AN ANALYSIS OF A 1920S FLAPPER DRESS

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"She wore skirts above the knee, with stockings rolled provocatively; skimpy little dresses, maybe spangled for evening, and nothing much underneath. Her hair was cut short. She was flat-chested, hipless, wiry. She slouched and strutted, cursed mildly and refused to marry. She was young, eternally so, it seemed, and revelled in her youthfulness. She had the unmistakable physique of an adolescent boy. People called her a flapper." (Simon, 2017, 7)

Fig. 1 Glamour Daze. "1920's formal dresses – fashion timeline 1920 to 1929."

Many people identifying as women would admit to being influenced by the iconic 1920s Flapper Girl. When I put on my short, black, fully sequined dress (which was not historically accurate) to costume myself as a "Flapper Girl" a few years back for an undergrad Halloween party, I felt confident, strong and rebellious, embodying a woman from this period of time. Most people who reference this time period in their dress often do not know how historically significant and progressive these Flapper Girls truly were globally. These women paved the way in the history of women's fashion in their too short, jazz dancing, cigarette smoking, champagne sipping, Art Deco wearing dresses. The study of garments from the 1920s can create and expose new cultural meaning through the legacy of this fashion, and reveal a story of radical reform embedded in material culture (Melchior and Skov, 2008, 8).

An object analysis of a black chiffon, Art Deco, hand-beaded 1920s flapper style dress made in France, from the Fashion Research Collection held at Toronto Metropolitan University, reveals the ornateness, style and fit of women's fashion of the time. This dress was an anonymous donation made by an unknown designer. The tag indicates it was made in France and is size 44. This blog post is dedicated to understanding the historical and socio-economic influences the flapper dress represented in Western culture through an object analysis of this anonymous dress (see fig. 2 & 3). To understand the significance of this garment, we must first acknowledge the history which altered the world, and therefore altered the world of fashion. Since this analysis is devoted to a garment made in France, the focus and positionality of this post is dedicated to Western fashion.

The Roaring twenties, also known as the Jazz Age of the 1920s, was a sweet spot in urbanized Western history, with the end of World War One (1918) and the beginning of the Great Depression (1929). This period in history was coined "The Roaring Twenties", highlighting the mentality of living in the moment, for those who could afford to do so. There was a large wealth gap during the 1920s in Western societies, where the rich got richer and the poor got poorer (Little, 2021). The romanticized era of the Roaring Twenties was only applicable to a small portion of the wealthy, and majority white, people in Western societies (Little, 2021), with 60 percent of Americans living below the poverty line (Plotnick and Smolensky, 1993, 22).

The term 'flapper' applied to young prostitutes in 1890s Britain, which eventually developed to describe adolescent girls (Simon, 2017, 8) and later was used to describe specific women in the 1920s. Flapper girls in the 1920s became well-known through their fashion and clothing: androgynous bobbed haircuts, rising hemlines, dropped waist, shapeless dresses, mainly to prevent being restricted while dancing to jazz. The stylistic choices "was a direct result of the changing position of women in society, especially after being granted the right to vote" (Strong-Boag, 2016). Flapper girls were often seen as rebellious, because this new liberated Modern Woman would celebrate new-found freedoms post World War I and engage in alleged masculine acts, such as: drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, dancing to jazz, etc. (see fig. 4-6). These women helped to pave the way for women's equality and liberation through their "rebellious" nature and their dress.

LEFT Fig. 4 General Photographic Agency/ Getty Images

MIDDLE Fig. 5 The Guardian Archive. Photograph: Bettmann/Corbis

RIGHT Fig. 6 Vogue. Kirn Vintage Stock/Getty Images

Women's fashion experienced a significant transformation during World War One, largely due to the increasing number of women entering the workforce to replace the men who were away fighting in the war. Adapting 'masculine' roles of physical labour required appropriate work attire rather than the traditional Victorian corset, and what was previously deemed 'proper' women's fashion. Women now attained the ability to dress themselves independently by only having to slip on their dress over their own head instead of relying on someone else to tie a corset. This moment in history is when women were adopting deemed masculine styles of fashion through clothing to signal an intention of asserted authority.

More women began wearing pants alongside the Garçonne style. This look was completed with a red lip, dark eyeliner, straight silhouette, flat chested, dropped waist, with a raised hemline of around the knee, often stitched with comfortable fabrics and was practical to wear. Some fabrics used during the 20s consisted of: crêpe de chine, linen, filet net flouncing, ecru cotton cord, wool, satin, tweed, silk, fibre lace, canton flannel, organdie, cordovan, etc. (Women's Wear Daily, 1920, 10 and 56).

The 1920s in Western society underwent a political, social and economic revolution. The women's suffrage movement was an important factor: the 19th Amendment was passed in the United States in 1920, allowing (white) women the right to vote; in Canada women could vote in 1918 (within varying provinces) (Strong-Boag, 2016); and in the United Kingdom women were able to vote by 1928 (Parliament, 2019). During the Canadian elections of 1918, anyone over 21, including women, who owned property and had not been convicted of a criminal offence could vote (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2024). This integral shift allowed women liberation and freedom which was a key component in the evolution of the Flapper Girl.

Consumerism grew with the rise of new technologies and communication, such as the car and radio. Karl Benz, a German engineer, created the first automobile in 1885 ("Biography", 2020), which was adopted and mass produced by Henry Ford in the 1920s (Gelderman, 2023), normalizing automobiles for people in the Western world. There was a boom in construction due to people moving from rural to urban areas in Canada, Europe and the United States which created a further array of jobs in industries outside of agriculture. Regardless of the extreme poverty rate, America's total wealth more than doubled between the early and late 1920s, with the Gross National Product increasing by 40 percent from 1922 to 1929 (A&E, 2023). This was a time of mass consumer goods which altered stylistic designs allowing for the birth of Art Deco.

LEFT Fig. 7 1920s Flapper Dress Front, photo taken by author

RIGHT Fig. 8 1920s Flapper Dress Back, photo taken by author

The beading style upon the black anonymous flapper dress is known as Art Deco. Art Deco was born from Art Nouveau between the First World War and the Second World War. During the 1920s, Art Deco flourished. Art Deco is a design and art style of the 1920s and 1930s characterized by bold outlines and geometric forms (see fig. 8) (Merriam-Webster, 2024). This style was heavily influenced by the new mass industrial production of machinery and modern urban culture, such as cars and architecture. Raymond Templier (1891–1968), a Parisian jeweller whose dominant abstract style was Art Deco, commented in the 1985 Goldsmiths' Journal publication, "As I walk in the streets I see ideas for jewellery everywhere, the wheels, the cars, the machinery of today"(Natl. Gallery of AU). This style can be seen in a multitude of examples such as: clothing, jewelry, architecture, interior design, furniture design and fine art such as painting, sculpture, etc. and is evident upon the black chiffon dress with the beading completed in an Art Deco design (see fig. 7 & 8).

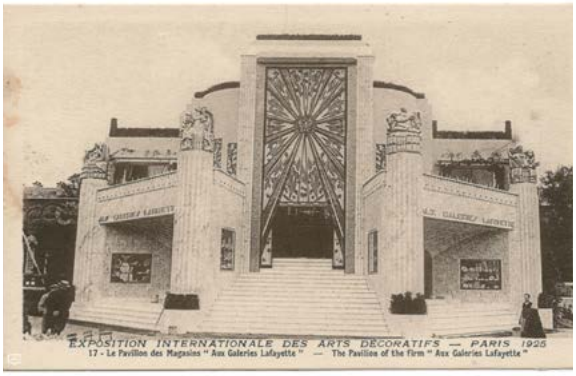
The term Art Deco comes from works displayed at an exhibition held in Paris in 1925, Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes (International Exhibition of Modern and Industrial Decorative Arts), later abbreviated to Art Deco (Goss, 2019). Planning for the International Exposition began in 1911, although the opening was delayed by many years over debate of exhibitor criteria, then followed by the war, with the conclusion to open the exhibition in April of 1925. Due to the economic suffering following World War I, France used this six-month-long exhibition to display prosperity, and boost the economy through hosting this exhibition, attracting approximately sixteen million visitors (Fiederer, 2016).

Over twenty countries were invited to participate in this exhibition. The only rule of inclusion being, anything chosen to be displayed must be modern, "The Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes was the first major exhibition to recognize fashion not only as a major industry but an important branch of the decorative arts" (Natl. Gallery of AU, 2023). Art Deco had existed for multiple years prior to the 1925 exhibition, which was evident through the many works and architecture, such as Le Pavillon des Magasins and Le Pavillon du Bon Marché (see fig. 9 & 10), being displayed in the Art Deco style. The exhibition perpetuated international recognition of the modern style Art Deco. The popularization of Art Deco due to the exhibition leads me to believe the creation of the anonymous black chiffon dress was completed in the late 1920s, after the opening of Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes.

LEFT Fig. 9 Le Pavillon du bon Marche
1925

RIGHT Fig. 10 Le Pavillon des Magasins
1925

EXPOSITION INTERNATIONALE DES ARTS DÉCORATIFS — PARIS 1925
15 - Le Pavillon du Bon Marché — The Pavilion of the firm "Bon Marché"


EXPOSITION INTERNATIONALE DES ARTS DÉCORATIFS — PARIS 1925
17 - Le Pavillon des Magasins "Aux Galeries Lafayette" — The Pavilion of the Firm "Aux Galeries Lafayette"

Two sections of the exhibition had been dedicated to the display of contemporary fashion:including women's wear by designers and design houses such as Callot Soeurs (see fig. 11), Jeanne Lanvin, Madeleine Vionnet (see fig. 12) and Jean Patou (see fig. 13) (Natl. Gallery of AU, 2023). Based on the example of the designers being displayed within the exhibition showcasing dress in an Art Deco style, with similar ornate characteristics (such as shape and beading patterns) to the anonymous black chiffon flapper dress, leads me to believe the anonymous dress was completed by a Parisian maker.

At the International Exhibition of Modern and Industrial Decorative Arts of 1925, the fashioned style derived from Art Deco, Garçonne, (the name deriving from Victor Marguerite's popular novel, La Garçonne, 1922)(Natl. Gallery of AU, 2023) was chosen to symbolize the essence of Parisian fashion (Beltran-Rubio, 2019). While displaying an image of a woman dressed in the Garçonne style, or more popularly known as the 'flapper style,' the Official Exhibition Catalogue announced: "Fashion like all other arts, interprets beauty. An elegant woman in a beautiful dress constitutes a harmony and rhythm of line and colour." (Catalogue Général Officiel, 1925).

LEFT Fig. 11 1925 Callot Soeurs Dress

MIDDLE Fig. 12 1924 Madeleine Vionnet dress

RIGHT Fig. 13 1925 Jean Patou Evening Dress

The Garçonne style was further popularized by Coco Chanel, who would often wear "her mannish cardigan jackets and boyish haircut," (Lu-Lien Tan, 2008) as a day look. Beginning in 1924, this look began to trend in both Europe and the United States. Chanel further continued the popularity of this style in 1926 when Vogue featured a sketch of her wearing the first Little Black Dress (see fig. 14) in the Garçonne style, influencing the Western fashion world into present day (Borrelli-Persson, 2020). "Chanel recast black as a stylish wardrobe option, freeing it for her clientele from its associations with service, shop assistants and mourning dress. Chanel promoted black as a chic symbol of modernity. Stripped of ornament, the colour drew attention to the clothing's simple line. In October 1926 American Vogue declared Chanel's crepe de chine day dress a new type of uniform for all women" (V&A, 2023) (see fig. 15). The reclaiming of the colour black for women's clothing leads me to believe the anonymous black flapper dress was created in 1926-1927 due to the rising demand for the popular colour black.

LEFT Fig. 14 An illustration of Chanel's little black dress by Main Rousseau Bocher, 1926

RIGHT Fig. 15 Gabrielle Chanel: Fashion Manifesto Exhibition, 2023

FIRST ROW LEFT Fig. 16 1920s Flapper Dress Tag "Made in France, Size 44" Detail. 2023.Photo taken by author

FIRST ROW MIDDLE Fig. 17 1920s Flapper Dress Art Deco Beading Detail. 2023. Photo taken by author

FIRST ROW RIGHT Fig. 18 1920s Flapper Dress Inner Silk Layer Detail. 2023. Photo taken by author

SECOND ROW LEFT Fig. 19 1920s Flapper Dress Beading Deterioration Detail. 2023. Photo taken by author

SECOND ROW MIDDLE Fig. 20 1920s Flapper Dress Beading Repair Detail. 2023. Photo taken by author

SECOND ROW RIGHT Fig. 21 1920s Flapper Dress Outer Silk Layer Detail. 2023. Photo taken by author

The anonymity due to the lack of information upon the tag of the black chiffon dress makes it difficult to locate an exact date or location of where, when or who made this garment. Although, the label stating, "Made in France," (see fig. 16) suggests the dress was created for an English speaking export market out of France, due to the tag being written in English. France, particularly Paris, was the modern centre of women's fashions due to the publicized fashion sketches in the French Mercure Galant, first founded in 1678 (Pouillard, 2013, 717). International interest for fashion design encouraged the circulation of women's fashions created in France, and the development of an international fashion press due to the monthly publications from the French Mercure Galant. Between the wars, Paris was still the creative centre for women's wear. French couturiers decided to allow access of their creations to foreign buyers while a more mechanized fashion industry in the United States was born and thriving, although still relied upon Paris for designs and creativity (Pouillard, 2013, 717). This leads me to believe the black chiffon dress was made and completed in Paris for the American women's fashion export market.

The dress has two layers: a black sheer silk chiffon covered front to back with white bugle glass beads, hand-sewed in an Art Deco design. Layered underneath is an attached black slip dress made of an unknown material. Regardless of synthetic materials, such as rayon, gaining popularity in the 1920s (Blanc, 2016), the matte finish and textured material of this extremely fine silk-like fabric, leads me to believe this layer of the dress is made of crêpe de chine natural silk, which was also very popular during this decade (Women's Wear 10 and 56, 1920). The external layer of the dress is natural chiffon silk, which further leads me to believe the unknown internal layer is also natural silk. The weight of the beads on the delicate chiffon external layer have begun to fall off due to the age of the dress (see fig. 19) although someone has tried to repair some of the fallen beads (see fig. 20). Multiple publications of the Women's Wear journal between 1920-1929 state the prevalence of beading in women's fashion, from night dresses, blouses, handbags, handkerchiefs, etc. showcasing many different beading colours, patterns and styles, "It is evident that beading bids fair to be one of the most popular modes of ornamentation" (1920, 56). The dress is sleeveless with a scooped neckline, dropped waist, with the hemline reaching just below the knee (see fig. 2-3). Due to the influential Garçonne style of the dress, the popularization of the colour black, the beading pattern completed with an Art Deco design, and similar characteristics to the examples showcased at the 1925 International Exhibition of Modern and Industrial Decorative Arts (such as: length, scooped neckline, and sleeves), this anonymous black flapper dress was likely custom constructed in 1926 or 1927 by a Parisian maker for the American English speaking export market.

LEFT Fig. 22 Vogue. "Christmas Gifts Number". December 1, 1925

RIGHT Fig. 23 Vogue. "Spring Fabrics and Original Vogue Designs". February 1, 1925

CREATIVE COMPONENT

To gain a further appreciation of the anonymous 1920s beaded flapper dress, I used vintage Vogue covers published in February and December of 1925 (see fig. 22 & 23) as inspiration to create contemporary photographs. I used my own photographic style while also examining specific gear and techniques photographers of the 1920s would have used, to try and mimic a photo of the past with a contemporary taste. By using contemporary colourized digital technology to create these portraits alongside a slicked hair style and gold accessories, allows for a juxtaposition between old and new.

The original dress, now being a century old, housed within the TMU Fashion Research Collection archives is too delicate for anyone to wear at this point in time. In order to mimic the covers of Vogue in the essence of the original dress, purchasing a dupe must suffice. It was not difficult to find an array of flapper dresses inspired by the originals of the 1920s from multiple different brands and companies. I decided to purchase one based on the Art Deco inspired beading, the black coloured fabric and the shape of the sleeves; all reminiscent of the original dress (see figure 24 and 25). Although the beauty and fine material of the original 1920s dress could never truly compare to the dupe, with its polyester fabric and plastic beads done up with a back zipper, the dress has a similar extravagance to the original. The 1920s fashion, specifically the flapper girl, is continually used in contemporary fashion. The iconic era, "Brings the past fashion to life through revivalism and recycling; uchronic, as it creatively reinvents the motifs of the past in the present" (Evans and Vaccari, 2020, 12). The influence of the flapper style is easily accessible to anyone feeling inspired by these liberated women, whether it be for haute couture runways, halloween, or everyday fashion; these rebellious women forever paved the way in the Western fashion world.

Fig. 24: Mann, Kirsten. "Christmas Gifts Number 1925 Copy" December 2023.

Fig. 25 Mann, Kirsten. "Spring Fabrics and Original Vogue Designs 1925 Copy". December 2023.

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Figure 1: Glamour Daze. "1920's formal dresses – fashion timeline 1920 to 1929." Glamour Daze: A Vintage Fashion and Beauty Archive. 2025. https://glamourdaze.com/history-of-womens-fashion/1920-to-1929#flapper-era

Figure 1 Description: An illustration of 10 flapper girls depicting one for each year from 1920-1929

Figure. 2: Fashion Research Collection. Front, "Flapper style black chiffon cocktail dress with Art Deco beading". Toronto Metropolitan University. 2003.10.002. 2025. https://ryersonfashion.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/9B891C9C-20D1-4B91-B7A0-982325340718

Figure 2 Description: A photograph of the front of a black beaded flapper dress on a mannequin

Figure. 3: Fashion Research Collection. Back, "Flapper style black chiffon cocktail dress with Art Deco beading". Toronto Metropolitan University. 2003.10.002. 2025. https://ryersonfashion.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/9B891C9C-20D1-4B91-B7A0-982325340718

Figure 3 Description: A photograph of the back of a black beaded flapper dress on a mannequin

Figure 4: CBC Radio. "How the modern flapper gal of the 1920s spurred moral panic in Canada." General Photographic Agency/Getty Images. April 20, 202. https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/how-the-modern-flapper-gal-of-the-1920s-spurred-moral-panic-in-canada-1.5450536

Figure 4 Description: A black and white photograph of a flapper girl sitting and smoking

Figure 5: The Guardian Int. "Four women dance the Charleston in 1920s London." The Guardian Archive. Photograph: Bettmann/Corbis. March 2014. https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2014/mar/07/archive-1923-pros-cons-slenderness

Figure 5 Description: A black and white photograph of four flapper girls dancing and waving

Figure 6: Vogue. "Here's what happens when you stop drinking." Kirn Vintage Stock/Getty Images. August 27, 2024. https://www.vogue.com/article/what-happens-when-you-stop-drinking

Figure 6 Description: A black and white photograph of four flapper girls drinking out of glass bottles

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Figure 7: Mann, Kirsten. "1920s Flapper Dress Front". Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection. September 27, 2023.

Figure 7 Description: flat lay photograph of the front of a black beaded flapper dress

Figure 8: Mann, Kirsten. "1920s Flapper Dress Back". Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection. September 27, 2023.

Figure 8 Description: flat lay photograph of the back of a black beaded flapper dress

Figure 9: AD Classics: Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes /Various Architects. "Exposition Internationale Des Arts Décoratifs — Paris 1925 15 - Le Pavillion du Bon Marché — The Pavilion of the Firm". Image Courtesy of Wikimedia user François GOGLINS (Public Domain). August 2016. https://www.archdaily.com/793367/ad-classics-exposition-internationale-des-arts-decoratifs-et-industriels-modernes

Figure 9 Description: Sepia photograph of Le Pavillion du Bon Marché building in Paris

Figure 10: AD Classics: Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes / Various Architects. "Exposition Internationale Des Arts Décoratifs — Paris 1925 17 - Le Pavillion des Magasins, Aux Galeries Lafayette". Image Courtesy of Wikimedia user François GOGLINS (Public Domain). August 2016. https://www.archdaily.com/793367/ad-classics-exposition-internationale-des-arts-decoratifs-et-industriels-modernes

Figure 10 Description: Sepia photograph of Le Pavillion des Magasins building in Paris

Figure 11: The Dreamstress. "Dress, Callot Soeurs, 1925, silk with beads." Goldstein Museum of Design. The Dreamstress - sewing, history, and style. September 2019. https://thedreamstress.com/2019/09/rate-the-dress-callot-soeurs-a-quest-for-the-source-of-inspiration/

Figure 11 Description: Photograph of a 1925 green flapper style dress on a mannequin by designer Callot Soeurs

Figure 12: The Met. "1924 Dress: Madeleine Vionnet (French, Chilleurs-aux-Bois 1876–1975 Paris)". 2020.361. 2024. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/839138

Figure 12 Description: Photograph of a 1924 gold / yellow flapper style dress on a mannequin by designer Madeleine Vionnet

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Figure 13: The Met. "1925 Evening Dress: Jean Patou (French, 1880–1936)". 1994.145. 2024. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/82464

Figure 13 Description: Photograph of a 1925 gold / yellow flapper style dress on a mannequin by designer Jean Patou

Figure 14: Vogue. "An illustration of Chanel's little black dress" by Main Rousseau Bocher, October, 1926. 2016. https://www.vogue.com/article/exhibitions-mainbocher-from-the-archives

Figure 14 Description: An illustration of Chanel's little black dress by Main Rousseau Bocher, from 1926

Figure 15: Mann, Kirsten. "Gabrielle Chanel: Fashion Manifesto." London, England. Victoria and Albert Museum. December 29, 2023.

Figure 15 Description: Photograph of three black flapper style dresses by Coco Chanel displayed on mannequins from the Gabrielle Chanel: Fashion Manifesto Exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum

Figure 16: Mann, Kirsten. 1920s Flapper Dress Tag "Made in France, Size 44" Detail. Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection. September 27, 2023.

Figure 16 Description: Flat lay detailed photograph of a dress tag stating "Made in France, Size 44"

Figure 17: Mann, Kirsten. 1920s Flapper Dress Art Deco Beading Detail. Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection. September 27, 2023.

Figure 17 Description: Flat lay detailed photograph of 1920s Flapper Dress Art Deco Beading Detail

Figure 18: Mann, Kirsten. 1920s Flapper Dress Inner Silk Layer Detail. Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection. September 27, 2023.

Figure 18 Description: Flat lay detailed photograph of 1920s Flapper Dress Inner Silk Layer

Figure 19: Mann, Kirsten. 1920s Flapper Dress Beading Deterioration Detail. Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection. September 27, 2023.

Figure 19 Description: Flat lay detailed photograph of 1920s Flapper Dress Beading Deterioration

PHOTO CITATIONS AND DESCRIPTIONS

Figure 20: Mann, Kirsten. 1920s Flapper Dress Beading Repair Detail. Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection. September 27, 2023.

Figure 20 Description: Flat lay detailed photograph of 1920s Flapper Dress Beading Repair

Figure 21: Mann, Kirsten. 1920s Flapper Dress Outer Silk Layer Detail. Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection. September 27, 2023.

Figure 21 Description: Flat lay detailed photograph of 1920s Flapper Dress Outer Silk Layer Detail

Figure 22: Vogue. "Christmas Gifts Number". December 1, 1925 Cover. https://archive.vogue.com/issue/19251201/print

Figure 22 Description: Vintage Vogue Magazine Cover from December 1925 depicting an illustration of a flapper girl wearing pearls and a green dress standing in front of pink roses

Figure 23: Vogue. "Spring Fabrics and Original Vogue Designs". February 1, 1925 Cover. https://archive.vogue.com/issue/19250201

Figure 23 Description: Vintage Vogue Magazine Cover from February 1925 depicting an illustration of a flapper girl wearing a black dress with red jewelry leaning against a wooden cabinet

Figure 24: Mann, Kirsten. "Christmas Gifts Number 1925 Copy". December 2023.

Figure 24 Description: a photograph mimicking a Vintage Vogue Magazine Cover from December 1925 depicting a photograph of a flapper girl wearing a black dress standing in front of pink roses

Figure 25: Mann, Kirsten. "Spring Fabrics and Original Vogue Designs 1925 Copy". December 2023.

Figure 25 Description: a photograph mimicking a Vintage Vogue Magazine Cover from February 1925 depicting a photograph of a flapper girl wearing a black dress leaning against a wooden bar cart